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CARE OF TURTLES AND SMALL ALLIGATORS 1/

Prepared in the Division of Fishery Biology

Cold-blooded reptiles, such as turtles and alligators, must have warm quarters. They should be kept in aquaria or other vessels into which sunlight can enter, and the vessel placed where it will not become cold. If kept near a window for the benefit of sunshine, which is life to them, care should be taken that they are also near a heater.

The temperature of the ordinary living room in winter is scarcely high enough to keep alligators active, since they need a warmth of 80° to 90°. They require not only warm water but a place where they can crawl out at times. The water need not be more than a few inches deep, and the platform or small log on which they rest should be placed in such a way that they can climb upon it easily. Alligators in captivity are most comfortable and active when they have access to water that is nearly tepid, and it is their habit to float much on the surface. Turtles require not only warm water but also the heat of the sun. The temporary warming of torpid alligators or turtles in boxes set near a heater is useless. If they cannot be kept where both air and water are permanently warm, they should be dispensed with.

The numerous chilled and weak alligators sent to the Zoological Park each year are placed in the sunny reptile house in a tank of water with a steam pipe in it. After a thorough warming up in water of 80° to 90° temperature, they begin to feed, and in 3 years will be a yard long, and weigh 12 to 14 pounds.

Since alligators and turtles do not feed unless kept permanently warm, it is necessary to provide them first with quarters where they will have a temperature of certainly not less than 75° of both air and water. They should also have the benefit of sunshine. Forcing cold alligators to eat by cramming food into their mouths is admissible only temporarily. They will eat freely when the water and air are warm enough, and will grow amazingly. They eat such a variety of foods that it is easy enough to provide for them.

1/ Extracted from Guide to the New York Aquarium, pp. 156-158, by Charles H. Townsend, published by the New York Zoological society, New York, 1919. (The Fish and Wildlife Service has made no special study of the care of turtles and young alligators in aquaria.)

Alligators and snapping turtles are flesh eaters and may be provided with small minnows, frogs, tadpoles, worms, grubs, crayfish, shrimps, and small crabs, either dead or alive. When these cannot be had they will eat fresh chopped meat, fish, clams, and oysters. Many kinds of turtles will eat all of the above named foods, as well as snails, small aquatic mollusks, and insects. Others like very tender, green vegetables, such as tomatoes, lettuce, celery, and various water plants. The food of some species consists largely of the bulks of sedges (Cyperus) while with others it is chiefly small water mollusks.

Some of the turtles are active fish eaters and will do well if supplied with live minnows. The wood turtles and other species which forage on land as well as in the water are fond of berries, mushrooms, and many kinds of fruits and vegetables, while nearly all kinds will eat grubs. The tortoises eat berries, mushrooms, and some garden vegetables as well as grubs and worms.

Turtles should be provided with a variety of foods until the kinds suited to each species are ascertained. Many species of turtles feed only under water, consequently it is absolutely necessary for them to have access to it when fed.

If their surroundings can be made to approach natural conditions- that is, if they can have access to a compartment in their quarters where there are dry sand, earth, and sod, where grubs, worms, and other food can be thrown in abundance, success in keeping them will be more likely to follow. It is remarkable how quickly they learn the exact location of food and drink. Once fed in a certain location, they will seek that place when urged by hunger.

It is obvious, of course, that the foregoing remarks by the late Dr. Townsend concerning turtles apply only to the aquatic species. A container or vivarium for land turtles should be provided with earth, preferably wood mould, and only with a small shallow dish of water from which the animals may drink. It should be understood that alligators are so agressive that it generally is advisable to keep them separate from turtles. Furthermore, some turtles, such as the snapping turtles for example, are so pugnacious that they, too, generally must be kept separate from other turtles.

BLINDNESS IN TURTLES

Young water turtles in captivity often suffer from softening of the bone, swelling of the eyelids causing blindness, and other serious pathologic conditions. Young turtles must be given the opportunity to climb out of the water onto soft dirt or onto a board sloping up from the water. Several hours of direct sunlight every day will do much to relieve the rachitic condition which causes the bones to swell, and the dry, warm air will help to decrease the inflammation of the eyelids. A rich diet of scraps of raw beef, live earthworms or snails thrown into the water will give the turtles proper nourishment, and, as many species are at least partly herbivorous, some pondweed may be left in the water for them to nibble on. The addition of codliver oil to the food, at least occasionally, also seems advisable. An aquarium with a hard concrete bottom, or the presence of rough stones on which the lower shell scrapes, causes a necrosia of the bone in captive turtles which quickly brings death. The remedy for the earlier stages of necrosis is to transfer the turtles at once to a pond with a soft mud bottom or to cover the bottom of the aquarium with fine sand and water plants.